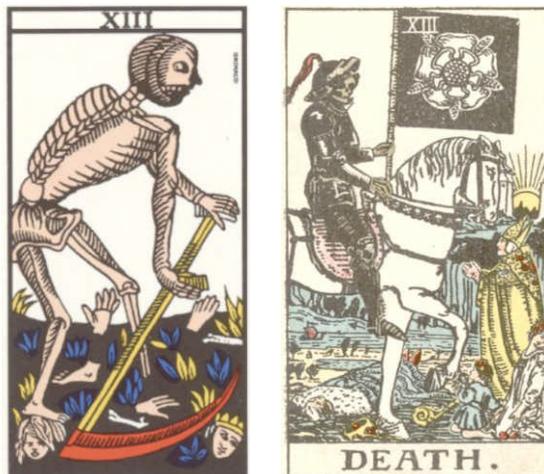


Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot

Lesson 12 : Many views on Death

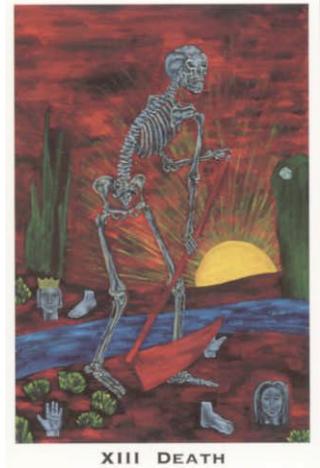


When one asks a person who has little knowledge of tarot, about which card they can recall, they often respond with the Death card. Indeed, the more superstitious sort of person finds the Death card confirming their view that tarot is sinister and frightening. The two best known decks, the Tarot de Marseilles and the Rider-Waite both present us with the conventional skeleton.

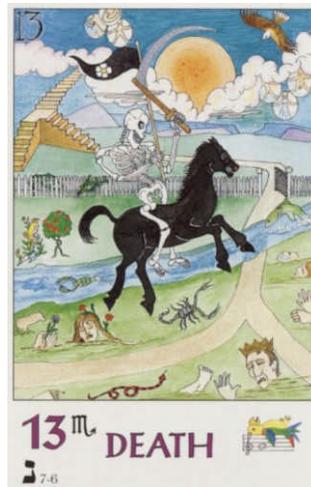


The Tarot de Marseilles opts for Death as the skeleton reaping heads like corn, while Coleman-Smith has Death as a knight on a pale horse treading on the dead (reflecting perhaps the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse appearing at the end of time from the Book of Revelation). Older decks and those derived from the Tarot of Marseilles often do not even dare to put the 'D word' on the card, and is it merely an untitled thirteenth card in the deck. This convention we find in most of the decks derived from the Tarot of Marseilles, such as the Wirth type decks and even quite recent variations such as the Rolla Nordic, but the Papus dares to title its thirteenth card 'La Mort'. The Knapp-Hall of 1929 though derived from the Wirth designs includes the title. Those following the Rider-Waite tend to title the card.

There seem to be two main symbolic elements reflected in the early modern decks, the skeleton reaper with his scythe and the Horseman-Knight. Thus Alison Stone's Tarot of 2000 follows the Tarot of Marseilles convention, though she feels comfortable including the title.



It is interesting to see how these two elements begin to become fused by later tarot artists. Thus the Rider-Waite apocalyptic horseman is soon depicted carrying a scythe, as in the well known deck designed by Jonathan Dee, the Parrot Tarot, the Japanese Saint Seiya manga tarot or even the recent children's tarot, the Gummy Bear.



The Dimenzio tarot from Hungary printed in 2001 keeps our skeleton on his feet but now has him in a suit of armour like our horseman on the Rider-Waite.



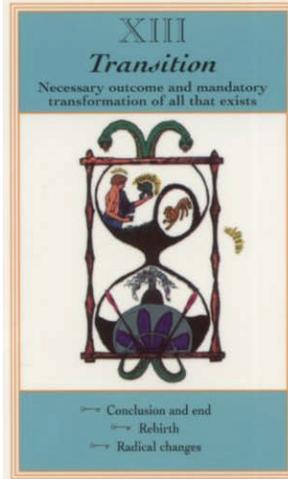
One of the puzzling elements emerging from Pamela Coleman-Smith's artistic imagination in creating the Death card for the Rider-Waite deck is the white rose which appears on the black flag born by the horseman. This white rose continues to be used by later tarot artists and is by some artists even deconstructed from its original context on the flag.



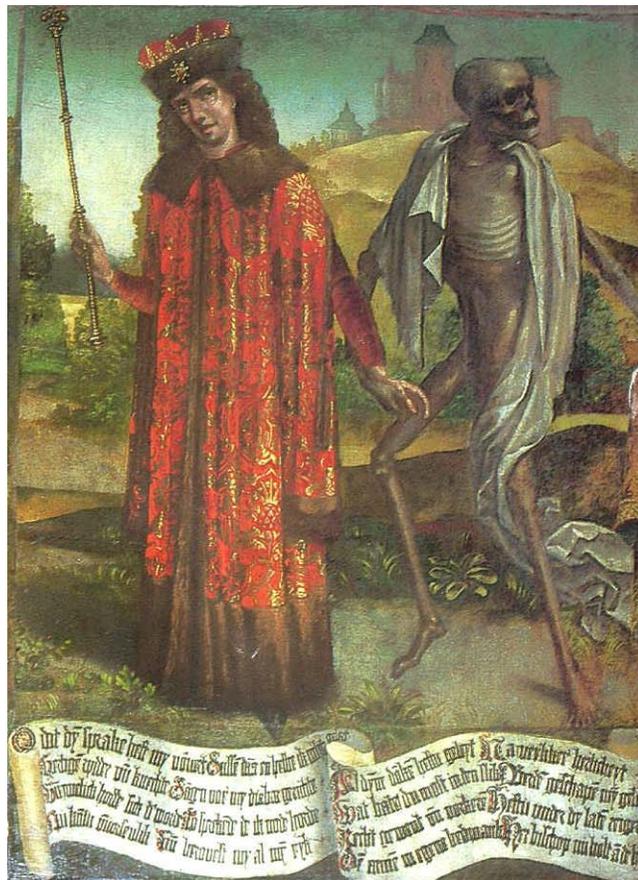
Here we see examples of the use of the white rose symbol in the New Palladini, Robin Wood and Morgan Greer decks. These last two also indicate a shift to representing Death in a cloaked form, moving away from the image of the naked skeleton or the horseman-knight in suit of armour.



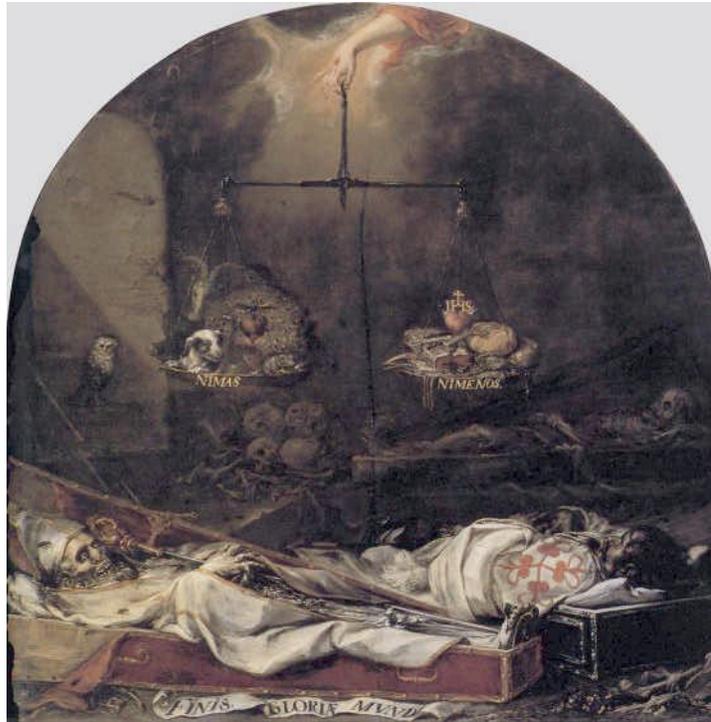
The Tarot Clasico a later copy of the Royal Tarot of 1995 presents Death to us as a robed skeleton against fiery background. Josephine Gill's tarot of 1990 has Death as a robed angel with black wings. This dark angel theme is used by a some other tarot artists. The Aleph Tarot has Death as an obscure dark-robed form. Robert Wang's Jungian tarot of 2002 instead has Death in a white robe while his black horse appears in the background. Another symbolic element is also included here, the hourglass that measures the span of ones life. We find this symbol in other tarot designs.



We are beginning now perhaps to see a connection with La Danse Macabre, also called Dance of death, La Danza Macabra, or Totentanz, a late-medieval allegory on the universality of death which was often illustrated with imagery of skeletons.



Another association that has informed tarot artists could be the 17th century vanitas genre paintings which reflected on the immanence of death and the vanity of holding on to worldly possessions. Such paintings often incorporated the skull and the hourglass. Here is the vanitas painting 'Finis gloriae mundi' of the 17th century painter Jean de Valdes Leal.



Some tarot artists understandably decide to walk away from the grimness of such skeletons and skulls and instead merely to show a body lying in the repose of death.



Here are examples from the beautiful Tarocchi Omaggio a Federico II created by Pippo Madè in 2000, and Nina Montangero's Tarot Médiéval of 2004. The struggle of dying is over and we are presented with the body at rest on a bier. The Solleone Tarot of Elisabetta Cassari from way back in 1983 shows a body being carried away unceremoniously in a sack.

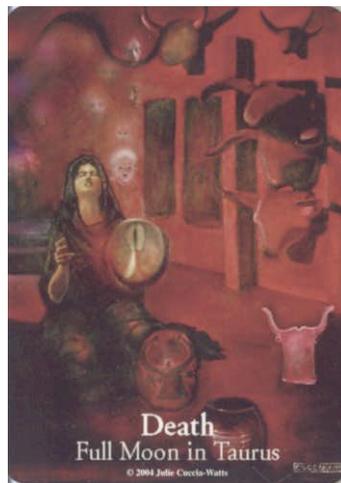
One interesting tarot Death image is found in the Nimue tarot. This deck was created by Vivien Stewart-Jones who uses the pseudonym 'Nimue'. It does not appear to have any direct connection to Celticism. A few card images follow closely the standard Rider-Waite symbolism, but most of the cards are entirely freshly created in a charming and coherent style. Her Death card is especially interesting as it shows a cloaked skeleton with scythe, holding open her cloak to show her pregnant abdomen within which we clearly see a developing foetus. This indicates that within death is new life. This is a radical departure from the conventional sentiment of the Death card and is particularly interesting in that 'Nimue' brings together the older symbolism with this new conception. Now, this tarot artist was not the first to present the idea of life within death, or death as a kind of rebirth, but this image is certainly very evocative and powerful.



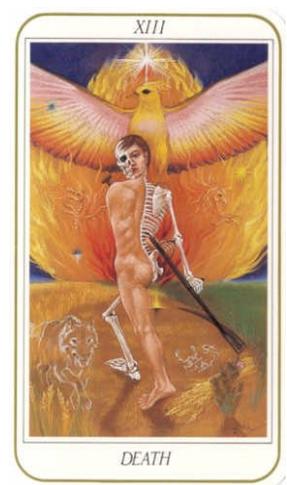
There is a whole slew of modern tarots which choose to present on the Death card an idea of rebirth, a positive transformation into some new state rather than an end to life. This resonates with our modern age which tends to ignore the reality of our mortality, and replaces this with a vague idea of some kind of rebirth. We find this beautifully articulated in the Oracle Tarot from 2003. Here it is not death so much that is being shown but release from the burden of the past. Melanie Gendron's tarot of 1997 renames the card to 'Transition' and shows us images of butterflies (reflecting their metamorphosis in dying from the form of a pupa to the magnificence of a butterfly). The Cornish Tarot decides to call this card 'Renewal' and shows us one of those tunnels of light that some people report as near-death experiences. The Merryday's 'Metamorphosis' card continues the theme of butterflies and soaring birds.



Other decks reflect this approach of the idea of transformation but through more idiosyncratic and less obvious symbolism. Thus the Tarot of Metamorphosis shows us a male figure walking along a path that leads to the large scale image on his horizon of a young woman. Is this supposed to be an image of reincarnation, the old man figure with his staff walking towards his future incarnation as a woman? It is puzzling and not entirely obvious from the imagery. The Blue Moon deck is equally obscure, depicting what appears to be a female shaman surrounded by cattle heads invoking spirits of the dead. Monica Knighton's Tarot of the Dead (2003) has skeletons and depictions of death on every major arcana card except the Death card. Here the format of a tarot about death seems to be forced to a contrarian position, and instead presents us with a pregnant woman. "In the midst of life we are in death" states the Book of Common Prayer. Here Knighton seems to suggest that death is with us even when we are in the womb. Now that is a challenging thought.



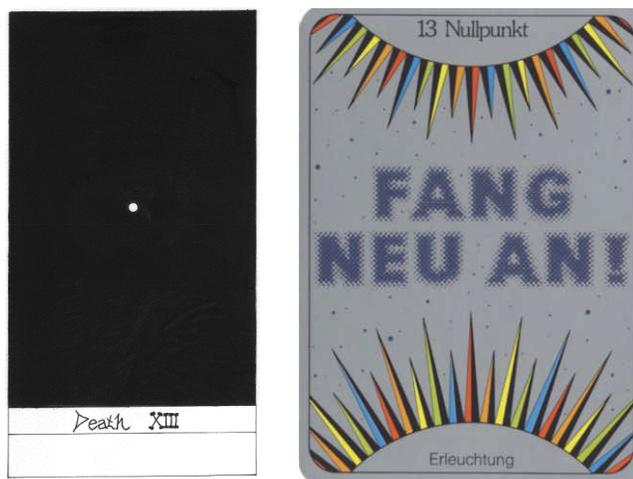
This idea of the interweaving of life and death is depicted in some tarot decks as existing simultaneously. Thus Marcel Kastaun's Tarot der Schatten of 1995 shows us a woman's head, one side a skull the other as a vibrant living being. The almost unknown Australian deck, the Millennium Tarot - The Tarot of the Four Worlds (1984), beautifully painted by Ziba Vilmanis-Westenberg, shows Death as a reaper, his body split half between a living man and a skeleton.





The Astro-Tarot of 1992 with its upbeat imagery, shows as its Death card a skull from which a red rose bush is growing. A similar image is shown in the abstract imagery of the Dutch Tarot van Nu created by Frits van der Ploeg in 1993, but here the rose is growing out of the handle of the scythe of Death. The Waking the Wild Spirit tarot (2002) which is full of New Age and neo-pagan elements, wanting to give a positive spin to Death (renamed to ‘Spirit of Change’), shows us a magician holding a baby. In front of him is his magician’s top hat complete with emerging rabbit. The only reference to death here are a few bones and leaves in the foreground. Eileen Connolly’s tarot of 1990 takes this even further with her Death or rather ‘Transition’ card whose imagery seems to have nothing symbolically connected with death at all. If we saw Connolly’s image outside of a tarot context we could surely never guess that this was a depiction of the tarot Death card.

The removal of all death related imagery is perhaps taken to its final conclusion in decks such as the yet unpublished tarot by Peter Rotin of Malta (2002) where Death is a lonely white dot seemingly shrinking into the dark void. The idea of rebirth is used in the Sternenmadchens Wahrsagespiel Tarot of 1975, where the Death card has a space empty except for the words “Start again”.



In the case of tarot decks primarily intended for a younger audience, the artists have sometimes sought some symbolic euphemism. Thus the Japanese Dr. Rin Tarot promo deck based on a comic book, shows us a ghost or spirit appearing within the body of the presumably dying character, presaging or foreshadowing death. The large format Inner Child card, which relate the tarot imagery to fairy tales, chooses Sleeping Beauty as its Death card. The Girlfriends Tarot of 2005 uses the image of a bowl of roses, however, as this seems somehow not to sufficiently reflect the idea of death, a little skull and crossbones is placed on the vase or urn, just to make it clear.



It will be an interesting exercise for you to try and discover the various devices of euphemism used in this group of tarot. Of course, many childrens' tarots are entirely upfront and explicit about the image of Death. We have already noted the Gummy Bear deck image.

We can see that all the nuances and complexities of the modern symbolism of death have certainly been embodied in the Death card designs of modern tarot decks.